

W.H. Auden on Homer and Virgil

K.W. Grandsen

Throughout his career the poet W.H. Auden was fascinated by the processes of history and by their manifestation on our earth in landscape and artifact. In the bleak 1930s he wrote in Spain:

History to the defeated

May say Alas, but cannot help or pardon.

And his birthday poem for Christopher Isherwood, 'August for the People', ends with these lines:

. . . all sway forward on the dangerous flood

Of history that never sleeps or dies,

And, held one moment, burns the hand.

In his early period the past for Auden meant chiefly the landscape and culture of the North, Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse and Icelandic sagas (he was of Icelandic descent and was once a pupil of Tolkien); but in his later years he became more attuned to the mellower landscape of the Mediterranean. In 'Goodbye to the Mezzogiomo' (*Homage to Clio*, 1960), he describes the effect of going south:

Out of a gothic North, the pallid children

Of a potato, beer--or--whiskey

Guilt culture, we behave like our fathers and come

Southward into a sunburn elsewhere . . .

Auden's turning southwards might unconsciously have been modelled on one of the masters he most admired, Goethe, who was inspired by classical landscapes and culture to some of his greatest poetic achievements; while in that reference to a guilt culture we may hear the voice of E R Dodds, who was a close friend of the poet as well as being literary executor of another member of Auden's circle, Louis MacNeice (himself a classicist who translated the *Agamemnon*). In his book *The Greeks and the irrational* Dodds had classified the society described by Homer as a 'shame-culture' (because it was based on *time*,) public esteem) and had distinguished it from so-called 'guilt-cultures'. Auden certainly concurred with Dodds's view that 'we ourselves are the heirs of an ancient and powerful (though now declining) guilt-culture'.

Rome and the Ideal City

Along with his love of landscape and artifact Auden possessed a deeply speculative mind and he was fascinated by the idea of history, on which he reflects in the title poem of *Homage to Clio*, addressed to the 'Muse of the unique/Historical fact':

Lives that obey you move like music, Becoming now what they can only be once . . .

Auden was a Christian and for him the ruins and symbols of the past were often contrasted with a world in which time does not exist, a heavenly city beyond the reach of reason. In one of his grandest poems, 'Memorial to a City' (*Nones*, 1952), he offers a historical survey of the 'post-Vergilian city', temporal, glittering, conscious and rational. We pass through two thousand years of misplaced and distorted ideals towards images of ruins and barbed wire, searchlights and loudspeakers, the contemporary horrors of occupation and imprisonment. Meanwhile, we see 'Adam waiting for his city', and while he waits, the only alternative to the post-Vergilian city is nature, 'Homer's world not ours'. The earth endures, 'the abiding mother of gods and men . . . for she alone is seriously there'.

In another poem in *Nones*, 'Not in Baedeker', Auden wrote:

There were lead mines here before the Romans

and in 'the Fall of Rome', in the same collection, he again contrasts the bureaucratic 'flu injected city' where 'Caesar's double bed is warm', with a quiet different landscape 'altogether elsewhere', a strange surreal place where vast

Herds of reindeer move across

Miles and miles of golden moss

Silently and very fast.

The epithet 'golden' suggests a glimpse of the golden age, the earthly paradise, immune from the infections of time and bureaucracy.

The Shield of Achilles

I will now look more closely at 'The Shield of Achilles' (included in the volume of that name, 1955), in which Auden contrasts Homer's world with ours yet sees ours as the inevitable historical outcome of Homer's. The poem is a gloss on the description of Achilles's shield in *Iliad* 18 and can instructively be read alongside it. For Auden, Homer's world was the world of nature, the world not yet spoilt — very

much the Goethean view of Homer. On Achilles's shield Hephaestus had made various scenes of war and peace, celebration, ritual, civic life, encompassing the whole with the river of Ocean so that the round disc of the Shield appears as an emblem of the Homeric world itself, the world of the similes and digressions. The scenes are largely peaceful, agricultural and pastoral, social and political — ploughing, reaping, vintage, a wedding, a legal dispute.

In Auden's poem Thetis is watching Hephaestus forging the shield. She looks for the expected scenes of peace, but each time she looks she sees images of horror and desolation— or, rather, the reader, moving through the poem with his memories of Homer, expects to encounter certain familiar, reassuring scenes, and finds, instead of these, a 'prophetic' vision of the nightmare of the twentieth century, the political and spiritual waste land of our own age.

Auden distinguishes the two sets of scenes in the poem's structure by using two different stanza-forms. The first form begins with Thetis's (and the reader's) expectations:

She looked over his shoulder

For vines and olive trees

Marble well governed cities

*And ships upon untamed seas * .*

The epic epithets offer reassurances and promise satisfactions which will at once be undercut, for each of the 'Thetis' stanzas grow dark with sudden appearance of the 'future':

But there on the shining metal

His hand had put instead

An artificial wilderness

And a sky like lead.

The stanza now changes (to the seven-line 'rhyme royal') and the imagery becomes bleak and sinister: the faceless 'leader' broadcasting propaganda, barbed wire, petty bureaucrats •••

A crowd of ordinary decent folk

Watched from without and neither move nor spoke

As three pale figures were led forth and bound

To three posts driven upright in the ground.

Auden's Hephaestus has included the crucifixion among his prophetic images of man's inhumanity to man. The poem's final desolation depicts children brought up in a world of harshness and pain.

who'd never heard

Of any world where promises were kept

Or one could weep because another wept.

In the poem's final stanza Thetis is dismayed by what the divine artificer has wrought, but Auden ends with a reminder that the shield has been made for her son

the strong

Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles

Who would not live long.

The solid, reassuring epic epithets now sound grim and hollow. The implication is that perhaps these images are more appropriate to Achilles and his world than those originally imagined by Homer.

'No, Virgil, No'

The idea that the modern reader brings to his reading of classical epic his own awareness of history recurs in a different form in the jeu- d'esprit 'Secondary Epic' (included in *Homage to Clio*). This poem also presents an ironic juxtaposition of two phases of history. In the 'Shield of Achilles' Homer's world is contrasted with ours; in 'Secondary Epic', the subject is Aeneas's Shield as described by Virgil in the eighth book of the *Aeneid*. The contrast is between the prophecies fulfilled in the *pax Augusta*, the golden age renewed, and that 'future beyond 31 BC' which Virgil could not (and of course never pretended to) see.

Wouldn't Aeneas have asked: 'What next? After this triumph, what portends?'

To which Auden answers with an imagined continuation of Virgil's eighth book:

an interpolation

Scrawled at the side of a tattered text

In a decadent script - - -

This 'interpolation' is composed by Auden in a brilliantly clever mode — he uses a heavy derivative, almost mock-heroic blank verse, to match his supposed late Latin hexameters, and tells the story of how Rome fell to the Goths and Vandals:

Alaric has avenged Tumus.

The final irony, recorded by Auden but not by Vulcan-Virgil on the Shield, is that of

*The names predestined for the Catholic boy
Whom Arian Odovacer will depose.*
The 'boy' was the emperor Romulus Augustulus, deposed in AD476.

Past and Present in the Epic

The argument of this poem is that Virgil's is 'a *Muse betrayed*' by political considerations.

No, Virgil, no:

Not even the first of the Romans can learn

His Roman history in the future tense, Not even to serve your political turn;

Hindsight as foresight makes no sense.

Of course, Auden knew as well as any student of *Aeneid* VIII, ancient or modern, that Vulcan's plastic record of the achievements of the descendants of Aeneas is simply a 'figure' for a summarised linear chronical history: Vulcan himself is a 'figure' also, for the *poet-vates*, Virgil himself. Nevertheless, Auden's poem, despite its teasing conversational tone, makes a serious point about limitations of secondary epic, limitations to which Homer is not subject. Homer's epics are placed in a legendary and largely *imaginary* past, whereas the *Aeneid* and *The Faerie Queen* can only 'work' as poems through their dependency on the poet's own '**now**'—the Augustan age, the Elizabethan. For Virgil, Augustus represented the culmination of a cycle, through whose coming all previous events gained new significance. It was no part of his plan to speculate on cycles yet to come.

It could, indeed, be argued that Auden's charge against Virgil:

As rhetoric, your device was too clever

rebounds against himself. For he has imported into the *Aeneid* his own Christian sense of history, which must be a pessimistic, Augustinian one, in which all events are 'for the time being', and their only possible end is the dissolution of the created world and the second coming of Christ, after which time itself will be no more. For Auden the temporality of human history cannot be all-embracing: no rim of ocean surrounds our world. A poem bound by time may well, in the long and ironic perspectives of subsequent history, come to seem 'dated'; but an updated *Aeneid* itself an absurdity, substituting for a still significant temporality, turning upon Augustus, one much more obscure: how many of us today know the name of the last emperor of the West concealed in Auden's last line? The fall of Rome was, after all, no more 'final' than the triumph of Augustus.

K. W. Gransden is a Reader in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Warwick. His works include a commentary on Aeneid VIII (Cambridge, 1976), and a poem in the Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse. A small collection of his poems will be published by the Mandeville Press in 1981.